

# Sweets for the Sultan



By Jamil Dababat




Like other traditional industries such as the *tarboush* and *sabot*, making sweets has become associated with politics in Nablus. The necessary change of government, even in distant lands, is reflected through changes in the forms of industry and factories.

Something strange happened in Nablus with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the British occupation of Palestine: one of the major prisons turned into a candy factory. The small prison windows and doors that once carried the bitterness of segregation became gateways for candy. In that

place, displaced Palestinians (from the 1948 territory) started to make traditional sweets using their special recipes, which continue to be made in exactly the same way despite the overflow of new types of sweets and candy.

A century ago, prisoners in Nablus used to dream of freedom in front of the old government building and prison. Today, people eat colorful candy whenever they wander down Sultan Street in the Bab al-Saha neighborhood in the center of the old city.

Confectioner Khaled Al-Qoqa stands beneath a huge arc built in the Ottoman style and welcomes all visitors who enter



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the factory he inherited from his father, which was once a prison used by both the Ottoman and English governments that occupied Palestine for long periods of time.

Palestine, located in the heart of the Arab world, has been for many years the focus of attention of the countries that sought to expand geographically. In Nablus, situated in the heart of Palestine, these countries left landmarks including this building, which is located in the heart of the old city. Any relationship between the regimes and the confectionery industry will never amount to the relationship that now exists in the city.

Nothing brings joy to Al-Qoqa like the sound of his colorful candy (chickpeas covered in colored starch and sugar) roasting on a slow fire in a place that once housed prisoners. Where the souls of prisoners used to roam around looking for freedom, these chickpeas now are prepared to be sent to the market and sold to people who are looking for something sweet and a little bit of happiness. "It's not





the stench of prison that I smell,” says Al-Qoqa, “but the scent of sweet candy.” He is a refugee from Yafa who came to Nablus in 1948 and took on the candy industry.

From the outskirts of the city the building looks like any other in the row of concrete that was once military and government buildings for the Ottomans, but upon a closer look the clear attention to detail is apparent, and the sultan spirit still lives in the old city of Nablus. Turkey has left a number of historical buildings and sites that are still referred to today.

A century after the end of the Ottoman rule, some people in Nablus still believe in the importance of that period and the events that took place. But Al-Qoqa doesn't care much for politics. Like a brilliant circus juggler, he plays with the chickpeas in his hands, and his life is far from the history of prisons. He thoughts are filled with the intimate details of an industry that has not changed in centuries.

“What's with Turkey?” he asked. It was here!” His neighbor, Najeh Kalbouneh, who sells used electronics in the adjacent building, responds: “Turkey is beautiful! Have you seen Nur?” He refers to a dubbed Turkish soap opera that took the Arab world by storm.

The smell of candy is in every crevice of the place, even in the small cells that Al-Qoqa uses to store machinery.

Standing underneath an arc with wide, flat, and obtuse angles, Al-Qoqa examines the building, which he has not changed, as though he were seeing it for the first time. In ancient Nablus everything seems the same, except for some modern buildings that have been erected on the ruins of the old historic buildings. The details of the buildings – such as the large windows and the stone steps – that surround the old government headquarters are still the same.

In Bab Al-Saha neighborhood, many people are familiar with the history of different eras, but few know the details of modern history. But there is nobody like Fouad Halawa, who shrouds it with ideological and political ideas. In front of a window located on the eastern side of buildings that were blocked with stones stands Halawa, who works in a restaurant in the old city, in the famous Khan al-Tojar. “Here is where the visits occurred. Those were dark times,” he says, referring to prison visits. Gauging the distance between the visiting window and Bab al-Dar, he added, “These all belonged to Turkey and Britain. They all lived here.” He points to a series of ancient buildings compacted in Bab al-Saha, where Sultan Abdul Hamid II erected the famous clock, which is one of the most important landmarks of Nablus.

Halawa's smile disappears every time he talks about the prisons of the countries and forces that occupied Palestine for centuries. He examines political systems through a secular lens. He believes that Turkey participated in the dissolution of Arab nationalism and identity.

In Bab al-Saha, many reject the negative perception of the Ottoman rule in the Arab world and instead view it as an Islamic model of development despite the bad living conditions that prevailed at the end of the era that was called “the era of the sick man” (a description of the final days of the Ottoman Empire). Turkey seems to have a strong impact on the traditional candy industry. Not far from the prison-turned-candy factory is another for Turkish delight.

In one of the oldest traditional Turkish delight factories in Nablus, one can understand the sensitivity of the relationship with Turkey, which greatly influences the industry and marketing of the sweets known for their Turkish origins. Nablus has been famous for its Turkish delight for many decades, but the industry, whose roots can be traced back to Ottoman Turkey, has evolved dramatically over the past years.

Ayman HerzAllah, whose family has been working in the classic Turkish delight industry for five decades, said that Turkish culture has affected the industry that came from Turkey two centuries ago.

A lot of people in Palestine are unhappy with Turkey's policies towards many issues in the Middle East, but people in Nablus always opt for Turkish sweets, not politics!

*Jamil Dababat, a Palestinian journalist and writer, lives in Tubas in the northern West Bank, and has worked in the Palestinian News Agency (Wafa) for the past 15 years. He has covered stories in Palestine, North America, Africa, and Europe regarding Palestinian and international affairs. Dababat has won several national and international awards and is specialized in covering political, environmental, and minority and religious affairs.*

*Article photos by Ayman Noubani.*